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ABSTRACT

Recent media reports have characterized the black family as vanishing and being replaced by institutionalized chaos, indifference, and "benign neglect." Journalists point to the high rate of teen pregnancies and the increased proportions of black families headed by single women, and describe black men as having little regard for the role of fatherhood. To rebut these myths and superficial portrayals, a study of black youngsters' perceptions of family relationships and responsibility in sexual behavior and early pregnancy was conducted. Questions were included to provide a basis for assessing the actual family structures that exist in the black community. Data were collected on 207 low income black students between the ages of 14 and 21. The findings suggest that subjects do reside more frequently with mothers, and consistently regard relationships with mothers as being more positive than with fathers or siblings. Nevertheless, the same data also reveal that strong, positive relationship continues to exist with fathers, even when the fathers are absent from the home. Other data support the observation that strong extended family networks persist in the black community. The black family is not vanishing; rather, the black family may be best understood as an integrated model which incorporates contemporary family patterns of single-parenthood with ancestral patterns of the extended family. It is therefore inappropriate to use a nuclear family model to evaluate or make judgments about the black family or to design government services for same. (KH)

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The Vanishing Black Family

Myth or Reality?

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A paper presented to the Fourteenth Annual National Conference on the Black Family in America; University of Louisville, Louisville, Kentucky.

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The Vanishing Black Family: Myth or Reality

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Introduction

In the past two years, America seems to have renewed its interest in reporting on the condition of the black family. Most media blitz paint a bleak picture of black America and suggest that true family structure is actually vanishing and being replaced by institutionalized chaos, indifference and "benign neglect". These new arrangements are being touted as self-destructive and non-productive. Most frequently soothsayers point to the alarming rates of teen pregnancies and the increased proportions of black families headed by single women. Prominent news people like Bill Moyers, have made painstaken efforts to televise worst-case scenarios of black men who define their manhood in terms of sexual prowess; men who have no regard for the full concept of fatherhood--men who have adopted a love-them-or-leave-them attitude about the women they impregnate and the children they leave behind. What these efforts represent however, is a rather surface level portrayal of the status quos. They do not reflect the much needed in-depth inspection of relationships between and among black family members that can only be revealed by creditible knowledge of the individuals' own perceptions.

The present discourse emerges from an investigation undertaken to study black youngsters' perceptions of family relationships and responsibility in regard to sexual behavior and early pregnancy. It is part of the work of the Special Task Force on Teen Pregnancy: Male Responsibility Campaign, sponsored by the Lexington-Fayette County Urban League and the University of Kentucky. With the assistance of the Private Industry Council and the Mayor's Office of Employment and Training, data were collected on some 207 low income black

youngsters between the ages of 14 and 21. One major question addressed by the research was: "How do black teens perceive their relationships with parents and siblings." In addition, questions were included to provide a basis for assessing the actual family structures that exist in the black community. Several analyses of data suggest that subjects do reside more frequently with mothers, and consistently regard relationships with mothers as being more positive than with fathers or other siblings. Nevertheless, the same data also reveal that strong, positive relationships continue to exist with fathers, even when the fathers are absent from the home. Other data support the observation that strong extended family networks continue to persist in the black community. Collectively the two data files do not support the widely hailed views that the black family is vanishing.

In this paper, the author will 1) articulate study results to explain how black families, like other American families, are changing in form, and 2) describe the viable family structure that continues to exist. The author contends that the black family is best understood as an integrated model which incorporates contemporary family patterns of single-parenthood with ancestral patterns of the extended family. It is therefore, inappropriate to use a nuclear family model to evaluate or make judgements about the black family or to design government services for the same.

As alluded to in the Introduction, the goal of this discourse is to assess the efficiency of popular claims that the black family is vanishing in American society.

Initial efforts undertaken to shed some light on the condition of the black family focused on basic demographic data. These data are presented in Tables 1 and 2. Table 1 contains responses made by subjects to the questions concerning the marital status of their parents. In this study, only 24.7%

TABLE 1

Marital Status:	Boys (n = 77)	Girls (n = 94)	Sample (n = 171)
Married	24.6	21.3	22.8
Unmarried	19.5	31.0	25.7
Separated	18.2	12.7	15.2
Divorced	22.1	22.3	22.2
Other (including, don't know)	15.6	12.7	14.0
% of Total Sample	45.03	54.97	100.00

of the boys and 21.3% of girls indicated that their parents "are married at the present time." If families are judged solely by the marital status of the parents then it would appear that black youngsters do not belong to viable family units and indeed, the black family is vanishing. However, there is ample reason to question the use of parents marital status as a yardstick for making judgements about the black family. It is argued here, that family, as a construct, can be investigated independently of marital status. That

healthy, nurturing familial units can be created by "unmarried" persons is overtly apparent. Any effort to make value judgements about the condition of the black family must go beyond census-bureau type data collected on the marital status of parents to address the structure of family as an entity. To do this, subjects were asked to indicate who they lived with the longest

TABLE 2

Subjects Principle Guardians
before and after the age of 12
(n = 171)

	Before 12			After 12		
	Boys	Girls	% Sample	Boys	Girls	% Sample
Grandparents	15.58	7.69	11.31	11.69	6.38	8.77
Mother only	42.86	53.85	48.81	53.25	64.89	59.65
Father only	2.60	4.40	3.57	3.90	4.26	4.09
Mother & Father	28.57	27.47	27.98	23.38	20.21	21.64
Other relatives	10.39	6.59	8.33	7.79	4.26	5.85
No response			10			7

"before age 12" and "after age 12" Results, summarized in Table 2, suggest that black nuclear family structure is vanishing, but not black family. Results presented in Table 2 reveal that almost 28.0% of boys and girls lived

with both parents before age 12 compared to 22% who lived with both parents after age 12. This increase in the number of families headed by women is well documented and the decline in the number of two-parent families is not surprising. Only 3.6% of youngsters lived with father only before the age of 12 and 4.1% afterwards. That men in this society do not assume primary responsibility for child rearing when the nuclear family dissolves is also well documented and further evidenced by the high proportions of youngsters who live with mother only before and after age 12; i.e. 48.8% and 59.6% respectively. While the condition of families headed by single women is alarming, the occurence itself does not provide a complete enough picture of family structure to conclude that the black family is vanishing. Other data from the same table suggest that nuclear family structure, i.e. parents and offspring only, is giving way to a more extended family structure that includes grandparents and other relatives. More than 25% of the boys and almost 15% of girls lived with grandparents and other relatives before age 12. After age 12 almost 20% of boys and 11% of girls lived with grandparents and other relatives. While the percentages living away from at least one natural parent declines over time, it is not reasonable to assume that relationships with grandparents and other relatives were severed. The decline is probably better explained by improved ability to care for offspring on the part of the natural parent. While the researcher did not investigate the cause of the decline in non-parental guardianship, what is important and obvious is the existence of a support structure which extends beyond the natural parents. When the family construct for black youngsters is viewed as a network of caring relatives, it seems obvious that nuclear units are

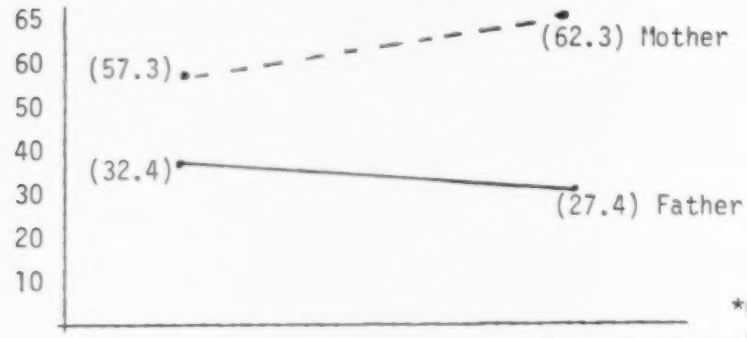
vanishing but not black families. That major social programs of the past 30 years have failed to significantly change the plight of low income Blacks is due in part, at least, to the service models which are designed to assist nuclear families. Assistance programs most low income families depend on not only penalize mothers, (through reductions in benefits) for trying to improve their economic situation, but also require the absence of fathers. It is ironic that more affluent citizens can receive tax credits for donating items they don't want to non-profit organizations while persons outside the nuclear unit can not receive credit for the most charitable of contributions--food, clothing, shelter, etc.--made to offspring that are not legally recognized as their own. This is not to say that the nuclear family model does not exist and is not at all desirable in the black community. However, the existence of the extended family must be acknowledged as a viable family structure and glaring reports of vanishment must be viewed with great suspicion as those who promote such alarm do so with ethnocentric perspectives.

At this point the research has yielded evidence to support an alternative view of the black family as changing structurally rather than vanishing. Because the family construct msut also include less conspicuous "matters of the heart," efforts were undertaken to investigate youngsters' own perceptions of family relationships. It was assumed that if the black family is vanishing, then clearly this dissipation would be evident in in subjects' own perceptions of their relationships to other family members For this reason, subjects were asked to rate, on a Likert-type scale, "how well they get along with parents and siblings at the present time" and "how well they got along with the same family members when they were in elementary school." They were

also asked to rate how well they think their parents get/got along with each other. For each question subjects could select 1) real good; 2) good; 3) good and bad; or 4) real bad. Analyses of responses to these questions allowed the researcher to identify trends in teens' perceptions of family relationships over time. The analysis of responses to questions about relationships with parents are presented in figures 1, 2, 3, 4.

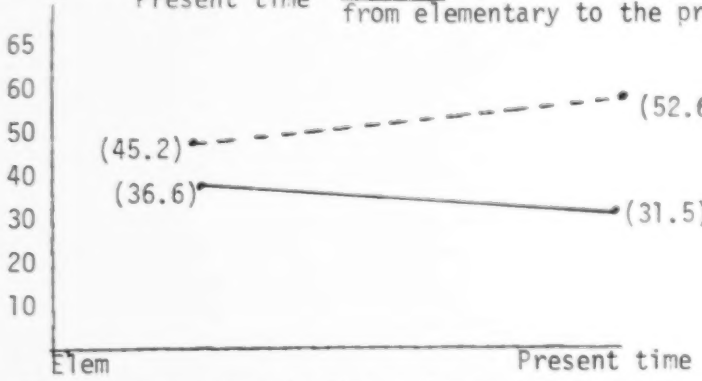
*Boys assigning highest positive ratings to parents from elementary to the present time.

Figure 1



*Girls assigning highest positive ratings, (i.e. "real good" to parents from elementary to the present time.

Figure 2



Initial results presented first are concerned with assignment of highest possible positive rating, i.e., "real good." The clear patterns illustrated in Figures 1 and 2 suggest that boys and girls perceive themselves as having the strongest positive relationships with mothers and that these relationships actually become stronger over time. On the other hand, subjects in this study

assigned highest positive ratings to fathers far less frequently and these positive ratings actually declined over the same time period; i.e. from elementary school to the present. On its face, the preliminary inspection could lead one to believe that black youngsters have high regard for their mothers and low regard for their fathers. One must recall, however, that subjects had four options for rating their relationships with parents; options ranging from "real good" to "real bad." When the two positive options "real good" and "good" are combined, a different picture of how youngsters perceive their relationship with both parents is created. These data, presented in figures 3 and 4, provide further evidence that younsters do have highest regard for mothers, but, the same data reveal that the majority of boys and girls also perceive their relationship with fathers as being positive.

*Boys assigning positive ("real good" and "good" ratings to parents from elementary school to the present time. N = 73

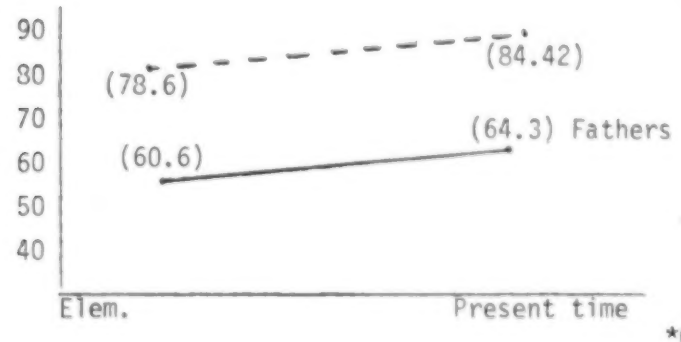


Figure 3

*Girls assigning positive (i.e. "real good" and "good" ratings to their relationship with parents. N=94

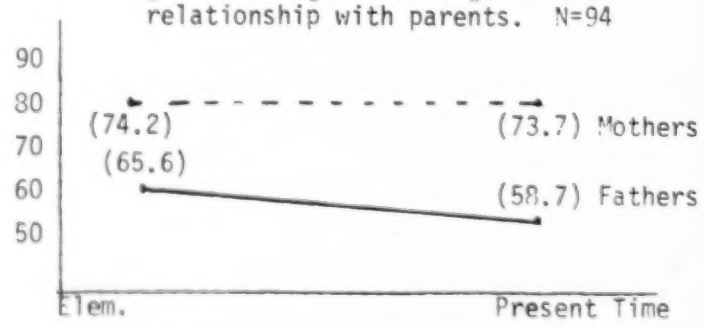


Figure 4

Given the options of assigning negative ratings without fear of recrimination, it is encouraging that the majority of youngsters in the study perceive their relationship with mother and father as positive and that this perception prevails for both parents in spite of the parents' marital status.

As mentioned previously, youngsters were also asked questions to determine how they perceive their parent's relationship with each other. The two positive and two negative options were combined for all subjects over the same time periods--i.e. elementary school and the present time. These data, presented in Table 3, reveal that the majority of subjects believe their parents have positive relationships with each other regardless of their marital status.

Percentages of subjects assigning positive and negative ratings for "How well parents get along with each other" from elementary school to the present time.

	Elementary School	Present Time
Positive	62.41	51.75
Negative	24.11	28.68

Collectively, the data on family presented in the second part of this paper, suggest that black youngsters' relationships with both parents is positive even though most subjects lived in households headed by mothers only. In sharp contrast to the bitter conflicts portrayed in popular media productions, black parents continue to maintain positive relationships with each other despite their marital status.

Overall, it seems apparent that popular misconceptions about the quality of the black family are based on inadequate, surface-level investigations which fail to take into account the changing structure of black families--i.e. from nuclear to extended--and the amiable feelings that family members are able to maintain for each other in times of change.